

## AN OVERVIEW OF TEACHER EDUCATION IN MALTA

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*Over the last few decades, changes of Maltese society have created considerable achievement and contributed to the development of a variety of teacher education courses focused on the growing need for quality education. It seems that the generational changes are rooted in cultural evolution and reflect society's changing needs (Twenge, 2009). These needs are expressed in many ways, including public and administrative support for preparing teachers to respond to contemporary and future societal needs and challenges. During the early 90s, Calleja (1994) documented significant progress in education in Malta regarding a comprehensive theoretical development and the extensive participation of the Maltese population in education.*

### INTRODUCTION

Malta is a community that has voted to open its doors to change through membership in the EU as of 2004 and the enactment of laws supporting radical social change such as divorce, civil partnership, diversification and multiculturalism that have gradually replaced the domination of the traditional faith-based education. It is clearly visible in the domain of social change and democratized access to education that Malta is now making considerable efforts to expand inclusive education (Bartolo, 2010) and satisfy the growing educational needs of the Maltese population. Like many other countries, Maltese citizens and the educational establishment recognize that a highly efficient and qualified teaching profession is a precondition for social and economic development. It is visible through the support for student engagement in tertiary education in Malta where no fees apply for students following a first-cycle full-time course at the University of Malta and the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST). In addition, all Maltese students following a full-time first-cycle degree course are provided

with a student's maintenance grant (European Commission, 2015). Teacher unions also contribute to the development of the teaching profession through provision of a relatively good balance between professional autonomy of teachers and their public and social accountability (ETUCE, 2008).

Teacher education in Malta has significantly changed over the past 70 years. Formal teacher education between the years 1944 and 1972 was administered by British personnel (Camilleri Grima, 2013) and initially delivered by two religious orders in two separate residential colleges for men and women. Since 1955, courses were organised in close collaboration with the University of London's Institute of Education (Calleja, 1994). These colleges were closed in 1971/72 and replaced by a co-educational Malta College of Education. During this period, a one year course that was first offered during post-Second World War years was extended to three years (Calleja, 1994). This certificate level course was the prototype of the degree course in teacher education first offered by the Faculty of Education within a newly reformed University of Malta in 1978. During the initial period of the university-based teacher education, there were evident tensions between the utilitarian disposition of senior members of staff who were, in large part, experienced teachers with applied degrees and the newer academic members of staff, usually pursuing doctoral studies that prioritised academic research, publications, and lecturing based on foundational disciplines over direct teaching (Sultana, 1995). This initial stage has led to a substantive development of teacher training which is currently focused on a wide academic development as well as the development of reflective, enquiry and research-based practice of future teachers in Malta.

The span of almost 40 years, between the launching of the first university-based degree course in education and the present time, marks a period of development and consolidation during which the degree level course has become established as the recognised entry qualification into the teaching profession. It provided the basis on which teachers were initially awarded the largely honorific title (Farrugia, 1994) of *professionals* in 1998 (Education Act, 1988). It is recognised that teachers need to become, increasingly more adept at responding to the diversity of needs present in the contemporary

classroom. These require increased teacher capacity and sensitivity to the changing social environment that is evident in the constant transformation and enrichment of teacher education in Malta (Clotfelter, Glennie, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2008; Pallas, 2012).

### **CURRENT TEACHER EDUCATION IN MALTA**

Traditionally, obtaining a teaching qualification in Malta required a specialized course of training and preparation for teaching in a primary, secondary or special school with children aged 5 years or older since age 5 marks the start of compulsory education in Malta. Early childhood education in Malta was introduced as kindergarten classes for four year olds in 1975 and, more recently in 1988, for three year old children (Sollars, Attard, Borg & Craus, 2006). The early years services was introduced as a reaction to the society's changing needs (Ministry for Education and Employment, 2010) and this sector of education was developed in a rather disconnected manner over time without an all-encompassing strategic policy for young children before they begin compulsory schooling in their fifth year.

The initial period for the provision of child-care services was perceived as a replacement of homecare since a greater number of females with children were employed in early-years settings. Only general qualifications were required for employment (Sollars, 2002). As an EU member, Malta is committed to achieving the Barcelona European Council targets (2002) committing member states to facilitate female labour force participation by providing adequate childcare. Currently more than 99% of children aged 4 years are enrolled in an early childhood institution (Eurostat, 2015). Also, in spite of a lack of official figures, Sollars (2007) suggested that data for the scholastic year 2006-2007 indicated that practically all three-year-olds were attending a kindergarten centre, certainly more than the 33% of children under three years of age that is the target of the Barcelona European Council (2002).

Recently increased participation of females in the labour force and the increased need for childcare services has incentivised teacher education providers to offer a teacher education courses covering a wide range of knowledge and skills needed to respond to the demand for education of

children at the pre-school level. There are two major institutions in Malta that provide initial teacher education and, although neither of them covers the entire range of teacher education, they complement one another with some overlap. In this short overview of teacher education in Malta, the term *teacher* is used for all levels of formal and informal teaching from age three to sixteen years. The Malta College for Arts, Science and Technology (MCAST) is a college of further education with aspirations to offer degree courses in the future. It provides two programmes of study for persons interested in working at the pre-primary level as explained in the MCAST Institute of Community Services website. (MCAST, 2014). These are the MCAST-BTEC National Diploma in Early Children's Play, Learning and Development and the Higher National Diploma in Advanced Studies in Early Years. The courses are respectively held at Level 4 and 5 of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). The first course is designed to enable students to work in a professional capacity with children aged 0-8. The qualification imparts the skills, knowledge and understanding required in an early years environment. Students are placed with babies and toddlers in nurseries and three and four year olds in kindergartens.

The second MCAST course is the Higher National Diploma in Advanced Practice in Work with Children and Families as explained in the MCAST Institute of Community Services website (MCAST, 2014). Whereas the national diploma prepares students to work with children in informal education settings from nursery to kindergarten level, the national higher diploma equips students with the abilities necessary to work in child care centres, kindergarten settings and, differently from the first course, prepares them to work in primary schools. Although holders of this award cannot be considered to be teachers in the formal sense of the word and do not teach in primary schools, the dividing line between the two becomes somewhat blurred as one of the course outcomes is listed as “develop[ing] lessons for children aged 0 to 7 years” (Programme Learning Outcome 4) which may be interpreted to signify that this award prepares students to teach in non-formal

environments such as after school homework clubs up to the age of 7 years, effectively the third year of formal education in the Maltese context.

In 2013/2014, a number of holders of this award joined the University of Malta's initial teacher education course in its third year. In practice, this validates the Higher National Diploma as being equivalent to the first two years of a formally recognised initial teacher education course. There are twelve EU countries where both education and care staff working with younger children must be qualified at the bachelor level. As of 2015/16, the minimum qualification for educational staff in Maltese ECEC centres will also be at bachelor's level (European Commission/ EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014) and this will have implications for the validity of this course in its present form. It is expected to encourage other academic providers such as the University of Malta to provide this type of teacher education at the MQF/EQF level 6.

The University of Malta provides two teacher education courses: a four year degree, undergraduate *Bachelor of Education (honours)* and a *Postgraduate Certificate in Education* (PGCE) for prospective teachers who have attained a first degree in an area that is taught at the secondary level and attend an additional year to attain a postgraduate teaching certificate. There are other, less frequented entry routes for prospective teachers holding higher-level, master and doctoral degrees at European Qualifications Framework (EQF) levels 7 and 8 (MEDE, 2012).

The minimum qualification of the members of teaching staff at lecturer level and above in the Faculty of Education is a Ph.D. or equivalent research-based doctorate in their area of teaching as well as a strong research and publication record. The Resident Academic Stream includes Professors, Associate Professors, Senior Lecturers and Lecturers, and they are required to possess a Ph.D. or equivalent. The precise conditions for work as a Resident Academic of the University of Malta are specified in the "Collective Agreement for Academic Staff of the University of Malta." In addition, members of teaching

staff include Assistant Lecturers and Assistant Lecturer with a Masters degree if they demonstrate exceptional results at the undergraduate level, possess a Masters degree, or if they are Ph.D. students close to completion of their studies.

Members of teaching staff, full-time Resident Academics in the Faculty of Education of the University of Malta, are required to provide their contribution to teaching and research, as well as to engage in administrative and other teaching-related activities. In addition to undergraduate and postgraduate teaching, the members of academic staff are expected to conduct research in their teaching area, publish results of their studies, supervise student research work, collaborate with educational institutions in their teaching domain and, in this way, contribute to overall national development.

### **INITIAL TEACHER TRAINING FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

Until recently, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) was offered on a part-time basis equivalent to three years of full-time study. It leads to the award of a Bachelor degree in Education with honours and is aimed at conveying a broad understanding of how young children, 3 to 7-year-olds, develop and think. Prospective teachers learn how to develop language, numerical and scientific literacy in children through creative multisensory teaching approaches. Like other three year courses, the total number of credits amounts to 180 ECTS. The course includes three placements (teaching practice) during which students are assessed for their knowledge, understanding and skills in how to plan, prepare and deliver stimulating and effective lessons. The dissertation is another compulsory component. The ECEC course amounts to 4,500 total learning hours; consisting of 3900 hours of theoretical studying and 600 hours of practical training. In 2014, the course was offered on a four year full-time basis with proportional increases in its different components including field placement up to 240 ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System).

### **INITIAL TEACHER TRAINING FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS**

This is a full time four-year course with a number of common components leading to the award of a B.Ed., *Bachelor's Degree in Education with honours*. The course is divided into the following main components; Primary Studies (55%), Education Studies constituting a number of educational psychology, sociology and philosophy study units (15%), field placement/teaching practice spread over 4 years (13%), general pedagogy (6%) and dissertation (5%). Other minor components constitute the remaining 6% of the course. While a substantial component of the course consists of primary school teaching related content material and professional issues, the field placement remains the central part of the course and is given much importance as it provides tutors and students with clear indications of the suitability of the student for a teaching career and the student's ability to apply what s/he has learned to daily practice. Students begin visiting schools from the first year and undergo a three week placement at approximately the middle of the year. They are given responsibility of a class for a six week period per year from their second year of the course. The time devoted to the teaching practice in the primary track programme is approximately 630 hours of classroom contact (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014). In reality, this takes much more time due to the need to prepare lessons, class profiles, case studies, and other teaching related activities.

## INITIAL TEACHER TRAINING FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

This course shares many features with the Primary School course and comprises 240 ECTSs. Due to the diversity of subject areas within the single or double subject course options, there is less homogeneity in the structure of the Secondary School course. The components that it shares with its Primary counterpart are the Field Placement/Teaching Practice (13%) but even this is not identical because students are only expected to familiarise themselves with the school structure in the first year and this is done through a series of school visits, completion of work books and small group seminars and tutorials. Similarly, secondary school teachers have fewer contact hours with their students than do primary school teachers and may require slightly less preparation time since some lessons are repeated in two or more classes. Another common component is expanded and covers diversity and Maltese law pertaining to education. This is the Educational Studies component which constitutes 18% of the total course. Secondary curriculum studies take up 59% of the course with the remaining percentage largely taken up by the

dissertation component, research methodology and some optional study units. For the double subject option, the percentage of the content is approximately the same but it is divided into two subject areas.

The Faculty of Education also offers a one year (60 ECTS) Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) for holders of first or higher degrees in various subjects. Thirty-six ECTS units are dedicated to Education Studies (Educational Psychology, Philosophy and Sociology of Education), Educational Technology, Design and Innovation, Inclusive Education, Pedagogy and Curriculum Studies. School Experience and Teaching Practice are assigned 10 and 12 ECTS respectively that is part of this intensive and demanding course designed to develop teaching skills and competencies of PGCE students who already possess an undergraduate degree in an area of teaching in Maltese secondary schools.

The Faculty of Education emphasizes the important role of the practicum and teaching practice component in all of its courses. It deems this to be a formative experience through which students are enabled to integrate theory with practice in the day-to-day classroom realities. This is expected to lead to the development of student teaching competencies. Through this process, students are encouraged to reflect on their own practice by compiling a teaching portfolio, profiles of student needs and requirements, and self-assessments for each field placement. During their teaching practices, lecturers visit students, observe their teaching and provide guidance. A team of assessors initially assists students to develop the required skills and, at the last teaching practice of the course, takes a summative evaluation of students' work.

### **ENTRY REQUIREMENTS**

This section describes only general requirements since PGCE, Early Childhood Education and Care, Primary and Secondary School Teacher courses have some specific or additional entry requirements including language proficiency, physical education proficiency test and ICT-related knowledge and skills. Students are expected to possess Advanced Matriculation Level passes at grade C or better in two subjects and grade C or

better in two subjects at Intermediate Matriculation Level, as well as a European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) Standard Certificate. There are also some other University wide general requirements for admission such as a subject undertaken by all students entitled Systems of Knowledge and Secondary Education Certificate “O” level passes in English, Maths and Maltese. Specific to the B.Ed. (Hons) course at all levels; Maltese and English must be offered at the intermediate level or above. Students following the PGCE course must possess a first degree in the chosen area of teaching (MEDE, 2014).

### **ASSESSMENT OF TEACHER EDUCATION**

Student progress is assessed through examinations, assignments and evaluation of teaching practice. The teaching practice team is composed of regular lecturers from the Faculty of Education, heads of school and education officers in various subject and curriculum areas who are all area or subject specialists. Examination boards consist of two assessors for each student who receives four or more visits during their teaching practice sessions. Teaching practice is coordinated by a designated unit that supports the teams of assessors as well as students during teaching practice. Low achieving students are provided with additional support and they are assessed by a fourth assessor who is a visiting foreign academic usually from an English speaking university since English is the official teaching language at the University of Malta. Exceptionally performing students may also be visited by the external visiting academic. Effectively, two external academics are appointed for a two-year term, including one for the assessment of primary and one for the assessment of students in secondary schools. The external assessors regularly submit their reports to the Faculty in order to improve teaching practice or to address some identified issue during teaching practice. This is perceived as a validation of the Teaching Practice component of the B.Ed and PGCE courses by members from collaborating institutions.

### **CONCLUSION**

In most EU countries, teacher education takes place in universities, colleges, or institutes with course length varying considerably from three to five years and it is obvious that there is a general trend toward an extended length of initial teacher training, which is even more obvious in the education of secondary school teachers (ETUCE, 2008). The length of the initial teacher education in Malta is currently four years (240 ECTSs) but there is increasing

support for improved quality and extension of the initial teacher education to five-years, three years of undergraduate education plus an additional two years Master's level of teacher education (Government of Malta, 2014). In the near future, it is certain that the majority of trainee teachers in Malta will attend master level courses for their preparation in primary and secondary education that is expected to provide highly educated, motivated and efficient teaching professionals.

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